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TANNAITIC REFERENCES TO CHRISTIAN FAST DAYS

This article may strike the reader as being inimical to the dominant thrust that *TRADITION* has maintained throughout the years. However, the study of comparative texts to illuminate obscure traditions had once been a thoroughly Jewish technique. Not only did the Talmud refer to unpublished texts, *megilot setarim*, for purpose of comparison, it amended these texts as well to aid the interpretation of obscure Mishnaic teachings. Moses Maimonides studied pagan manuals so he could understand to what the obscure laws of the Torah were reacting.

If then, we find a law of the Tannaim prohibiting one from leaving his house on Wednesday or Friday nights should we not search the literature of the times to find a reason? At the close of the first century the book of *Didache* mentioned that Christians should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. In the same time period the book of *Barnabas* mentioned that the number "eighteen" refers to Jesus since IH(=18) are the beginning letters of his name in Greek.

The *B'raita* forbids Jews to leave their homes on these nights for fear of the "eighteen myriads of destructive agents." The fact that this state of affairs is said to have begun at the time of Hanina ben Dosa (also late first century) is highly suggestive.

It is my purpose to illustrate the value of comparative methods in elucidating classical Jewish texts. Unfortunately today, most Orthodox scholars needlessly perceive such methods as a threat to piety. As a result, Yeshiva students are psychologically ill prepared to engage in such studies. It is hoped that this article will move some Talmudists either to show me the futility of this method (currently used by non-traditionalists) or to admit that

Tannaitic References to Christian Fast Days

they have thrown out the baby with the bath water by rejecting comparative tools as unacceptable.

The Palestinian Jews of the third century believed in demons but they did not incorporate these beliefs into a formal ritual. They merely avoided ruins where demons were thought to frequent and attributed some of their personal misfortunes to the little devils. On the other hand, the Babylonian Jews developed a sophisticated demonology, complete with charms and rituals. The fourth century Babylonian sages sought to explain obscure customs still prevalent in their times by reference to demons. They assumed that many Palestinian customs and teachings were meant to protect against demons. In this way they were able to explain Tannaitic practices which failed more practical elucidation.

In the early centuries of Christianity, ascetics and others fasted every Wednesday and Friday. The Syrians called these stationary fasts *tsuma d'arba*, *tsuma d'aruvta*. Those who mocked these fasts throughout the year were called "Jews and crucifiers." Of course, the Jews were careful to stay away from these Christians on Wednesday and Friday nights when the Christians had regained their strength. The Jews avoided these dangers by not going out, even to drink water, on these nights. These days were particularly perilous for Jews as the Christians fasted because they believed the Jews plotted against their Savior on a Wednesday, while the actual day of the Crucifixion was a Friday.

The Jewish religious authorities forbade Jews to go out alone on these nights. They considered Wednesday night and Friday night rainfalls as particularly favorable blessings. Most Jews would stay home on these nights but go out on other nights. If it rained at these times exclusively, no one would be inconvenienced and the crops would still have sufficient rain. This state of affairs must have continued in Syria, Egypt and Palestine for an extensive period of time. Palestinian teachings from these years reflect the fear of persecutions.

The later Babylonian teachers were perplexed by these traditions. Being unaware of Christian persecution in Palestine but very aware of the threat of demons, they made a natural assumption. They attributed the precautions of not venturing out alone

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

on Wednesday and Friday nights to the menace of demons. They thought that the unexplained dangers cited by earlier Rabbis referred to the power of evil spirits. In this way they combined general Persian superstitions into a Jewish context.

During the time of the Palestinian enactments prohibiting one from going out on these nights, the Christian ascetic and miracle worker, Abba Apollo of Egypt, gave a treatise which is extant in a Syriac version. I have translated this text from Budge's "Book of Paradise," London, 1904.

Indeed the only exception to the stationary fasts, whose fame is known, is the case where there is strong hunger. On Wednesdays we fast on account of the evil devised by the Jews who betrayed their victim and also on Fridays, for on it he was crucified. But he who casts them aside is of the Jews and crucifiers. Yet, if there comes to you, your brother who is suffering, bring refreshment, that he should not now wither from fasting. Place before him your table, for him alone. If, however, he does not agree you shouldn't afflict him with hunger, for the sake of His only child, blessed be he.

The fast days were well known and kept by many Christian ascetics. It is not difficult to imagine the deep anti-Semitism that these fasts engendered. Yet no Jewish historical documents have survived from these times and it is only from the records preserved by the Talmud that we can gain the Jewish view of these particular Christian fast-days. The Babylonian Talmud *Ta'anit* 23a records:

The Palestinian Rabbis taught in a *b'raita*: The Biblical verse "And I will give your rains in their season" means . . . the words "in their season" refer to Wednesday nights and Friday nights. For we have found that in the days of Simeon ben Shetach, rain fell on Wednesday nights and Friday nights while the wheat grew to the size of kidneys . . .

The commentators point out that the benefits accruing from specific rains were not applicable to the times of Simeon. Simeon lived in pre-Christian times while the benefits of having rains on specific nights according to one tradition are only applicable to the times of Hanina ben Dosa who lived in early Christian times, or later. We have an anachronism in this statement as no

Tannaitic References to Christian Fast Days

purpose would be served in Simeon's time by rainfalls on those particular nights. Rather the point is to show that night rains are sufficient to grow excellent crops. The mention of Wednesday and Friday nights was just an allusion to the times of the author of the statement. If it rained on those two nights alone there would be more than enough food and the Jews would not be inconvenienced as they could not go out anyway. Yet, there is a more plausible interpretation of this statement. The author held, as many did, that Yehoshua ben Perachia was the teacher of Jesus. Yehoshua and Simeon were contemporaries although Simeon was the younger. Thus our author believed that Wednesday and Friday nights were dangerous nights for Jews in the era of Simeon ben Shetach. He placed the Christian Era as early as 80 B.C.E. But if so; then who was responsible for limiting the persecutions to only Wednesdays and Fridays? Not the tradition current in Babylonian schools which ascribed this feat to Hanina ben Dosa. He lived two hundred years later. It must have been Yehoshua ben Perachia. The Babylonians thought that a great sage had banished demons but that they returned on Wednesdays and Fridays. A tradition not recorded in the Talmud but found in Aramaic incantation texts from Nippur is recorded by Montgomery. This tradition relates that Yehoshua ben Perachia had banished demons but somehow the demons returned. The texts quoted by Montgomery attempt to ratify Yehoshua's ban.

It is crystal clear that the Palestinian teacher of the *b'rait*a considered Wednesday nights and Friday nights as the best times for rain to fall. Considering that his Christian neighbors had been fasting on these days to commemorate what they saw as the perfidy of the Jews, this teacher was indeed safer at home on these nights.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Pesachim* 112b) relates:

We learned from a Palestinian *b'rait*a:

One should not go out alone at night. Not on Wednesday nights nor on Friday nights. For Igrath the daughter of Machalath and 180,000 destructive angels go out. Each one is allowed to destroy independently of the others.

We are supplied with additional information in this passage.

Igrath is the Aramaic word for roof. As demons were worshipped on roofs and thought to inhabit high places, the word adopted a transferred meaning, "demon." The commentators point out that Machalath is to be identified as the wife of Esau who bore many evil spirits in Jewish lore. The children of Esau were identified with anti-Semites and in later times with Christianity alone. "Igrath," then, refers to anti-Semitic Christians who must have attacked Jews on these nights. The term "angels of destruction" may refer to the local Palestinian bishops. Hilary the Deacon, Epiphanius and other early Christian writers note that by "angels" we mean "bishops." In fact the Saxons referred to their bishops as "bydels" or angels. Now according to Tertullian, Austin and others, bishops ordain fasts independently. Also, the early Christians in the Roman Empire were thought to be magicians. Suetonius calls them "men of magical superstition" and Ambrose relates that at the martyrdom of Agnes the crowds shouted, "away with the sorceress."

The following explanation of "Igrath and her destructive angels with independent authority" suggests itself. Igrath, the daughter of Esau and Machalath (but demons always named through the mother), is the symbol of Christianity, commonly considered a magic cult. The destructive angels are the bishops. 180,000 seems a gross exaggeration of the number of bishops but there was in fact an unproportionately large number of bishops in tiny Palestine as compared to many larger countries. In fact, the allusion to the independence of the bishops is substantiated. The bishops set their own fasts. Apollo, Clemens, Tertullian (2nd century), Origen, Basil, Jerome, Epiphanius, mention specifically the Wednesday and Friday fasts which must have been the most popular. They say they are common fasts and explain their origin. Some bishops kept the fasts, others did not. The Jews also believed that the threat of "Igrath" was limited by supernatural means. Either Hanina or Yehoshua accomplished this. The story of Igrath highlights the probability that if there is to be danger from the bishops in a given locale, then it will be on a Wednesday or a Friday night.

In the Talmudic Period, Persian culture was dominated by fanatic Zoroastrian beliefs. We have little information as to the

Tannaitic References to Christian Fast Days

ascetic Christian practices in Persia during this period but it is most unlikely that they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. The Persians in general opposed ascetic practices and the Zoroastrians never fasted. Thus the Persian Jews erroneously came to associate the practice of staying in on Wednesdays and Fridays with demonology and associated the stories of Rabbi Hanina or Rabbi Yehoshua with exorcism. The Babylonian exorcism tales consider the necessity of remaining at home two nights a week as an improvement over previous conditions when there were daily threats. These stories more likely reflect either polemical or political activities in Palestine to protect the Jews.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Pesachim* 112a) states:

The Tannaim taught: A man should not (go out to) drink water on either Wednesday or Friday nights. If he does drink, his blood is on his head. This is on account of the danger.

The Babylonian scholars asked: to what does "danger" refer? They answered: "To evil spirits."

Gradually the Persian Jews added to these superstitious practices, wondering why their great Rabbis had not banished these spirits entirely. They adopted superstitious usages in the handling of their foods, especially on Wednesday and Friday nights. Perhaps they assimilated general customs of the Persian populace and read them into their Jewish religious traditions. Not enough is known about Persian practices of this period to speculate further in this matter.

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See my article (in press) J.S.J.

“Superstitious Interpretations of Jewish Law.”